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THE RUSSIAN PICKWICK

BY ALICE BIRKHEAD

THE greater humorists have seldom been content to keep their imagination within very narrow bounds since even a trained psychologist would have difficulty in grasping national characteristics unless there were offered for his inspection a large number of types. Cervantes chose Don Quixote as his hero, a poor half-crazy knight, so eager to win glory that he wanders in quest of adventures all over the countryside. Dickens decided that the England he loved could be seen to the best advantage through the spectacles of Samuel Pickwick, a retired elderly merchant, travelling at leisure with a kind of Club. Gogol, more nearly approaching the English satirist than the Spanish in his lack of bitterness, hit upon the strangest of excuses for the peregrinations of Tchitchikoff.

Gogol, like Dickens, was a young man when he began to write. It is clear that he set before himself almost the same literary ideals—to draw certain of his country-people in such broad outline that the reader might laugh at their absurdities, yet forbear to imitate; to hold up to public notice some abuses that were accepted far too indifferently by his country. Dickens' brief experience in a lawyer's office had given him the opportunity of studying the legal system of the times. He had probably met sharp practitioners like Messrs. Dodson and Fogg, and seen them get victims into their clutches as

harmless and benevolent as Mr. Samuel Pickwick, for he was familiar with every possible grade of lawyer's clerk. In the same way Gogol, who held a small clerical post in a Government office in St. Petersburg, found plenty of material for his studies of the corruption of the Russian bureaucracy. He may even have come across a rogue with a scheme to make his fortune easily by the purchase of dead "souls," or serfs, from owners who were only too glad to escape paying the taxes demanded by the Government. As Tchitchikoff explains to doubtful proprietors, "souls," set down in the Census lists, although they might have completed their earthly career, were, nevertheless, still taxed like the living ones.

Gogol came from the South, and understood the subtleties of bargaining, for his ancestors had been used to traffic in "souls." He wanted to describe the beauties of the Southern spring, the khorovods of the village maids and the gallants stepping forward to hold their white hands as they laughed and sang "Lords, show the bridegroom." He wanted also to urge Russia to advance from the lassitude and idleness that reduced many of the owners of fine estates to a condition little better than that of their ignorant peasants. Therefore he withdrew his hero from the Department of Justice, where he had made his way to a lucrative position through a comely appearance and a

desire to please, and set him off on a tour through various corners of the Empire, with the idea that he might one day settle down on his own property with a fine complement of live serfs.

Tchitchikoff did not address himself at random to any owners of the land, but selected the men who were most to his taste, since he hoped, as far as possible, to acquire the "dead souls" from friendship. This prudence of his hero is enlarged upon by Gogol, who intended to present the miser, the spendthrift, and the futile dreamer as warnings to his countryfolk to strive against the natural tendencies most fatal in any age to the Russian. The dealers in serfs are all, in their way, quite as true to type as Messrs. Dodson and Fogg, Mr. Justice Stareleigh, and their myrmidons. It would be possible to find a modern equivalent for Nozdreff, the half-attractive wastrel who tries to bully Tchitchikoff into buying his dog, his chestnut mare, or an old hand-organ, and finally proposes to gamble for the "souls," having his full share of the national passion for the card-tables.

Tumbledown buildings and slovenly interiors were the correct background for a novel of manners in which Maniloff, Nozdreff, and Pliushkin moved—types so universally recognised that they are household words in Russia. Dickens, with equal truth, dwells on the snugness and prosperity of the English farms where jolly Mr. Wardle entertains Mr. Pickwick and his brethren. England, in 1837, was entering on an era of substantial peace that made the Victorian writers almost gloat over details of Victorian comfort.

Russia had not taken the step that led to the formation of a middle class—the very idea of the emancipation of the serfs would have given Tchitchikoff cause to shudder! Yet Gogol's hero is as representative of his country and his age as the benevolent Pickwick who stands for the cheerful mediocre type, half-lovingly caricatured by the enemies of England.

Gogol was a true Russian in refusing a hero possessed of all the virtues for his greatest book. "Who is he? A knave, of course." The student of Russian literature knows very well that he must not shrink from meanness laid bare in a country where the poorest runs to give alms to "the unfortunate" when he passes through a town on his way to exile in Siberia. The satirist relents when the bold adventurer falls upon evil days, and reveals hidden feelings in his hero which had been stifled by the dreariness of his home life and the miserable isolation of his earliest surroundings. In the same way, Dickens brought the roguish Alfred Jingle low to discover certain fine qualities in the strolling player and his snivelling servant Job as soon as he had placed them in a debtors' prison. Although Gogol and Dickens knew how to apply the scourge, there is no trace of cynicism in their work nor indifference to the world around them. It was their generous humanity rather than their intellectual powers which placed them among the writers whose works are for all time. Everybody in Russia has a certain sympathy for that smooth-faced adventurer Tchitchikoff, as everybody in England has an affectionate regard for pompous, kind-hearted Mr. Samuel Pickwick.